

IN THINKING OF EVIL

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There is a universal challenge in seeking to understand the Holocaust, albeit one too difficult for most to confront: how can we move beyond our limited capacity for emotional understanding, that inescapable feeling of lacking that one faces while trying to imagine the experience of the victims? Blunt facts and figures have become an acceptable crutch these days. Six million Jews. Two thirds of the Jewish population of Europe. Eleven million overall. Adolf Eichmann was a man of facts and figures. And though he facilitated mass murder on an unprecedented scale, he did not do so with a sword, but with a spreadsheet. Eichmann hardly saw with his own eyes the horrible consequences of his actions, yet in his mind he knew them full well. Still, his mindset disconnected the names—those that could be found on the pages of spreadsheets stacked in nondescript filing cabinets around his Vienna office—from the souls they represented. In writing this essay, there are times when I will slip into a similar mindset. In certain instances, there is hardly more I can give you besides the facts and figures. These you surely must know, and I do not fault myself for presenting the subject in such a way. It is, after all, an approach commonly taken by our contemporary educators and historians. I do not fault them, either, for time has only made understanding harder, made memory banal. Even so, a failure to think beyond the facts and figures, or at least a failure to attempt to do so, implicitly accepts the apathetic way of Eichmann. It is therefore all the more important that we wrestle with this common yet crucial challenge, both as individuals and as a society.

As a shepherd examines his flock, making his sheep pass under his staff,
so do you cause to pass [before you] every living soul, and You count,
reckon and are mindful of [them] . . . and inscribe the verdict of their
judgment.

—Unetaneh Tokef (Author Unknown)

On April 11, 1961, former Nazi lieutenant colonel Adolf Eichmann stood before a special tribunal in Jerusalem in defense of his crimes. His trial was broadcast worldwide, as the event was seen by many as a closing chapter in the prosecution of Nazi war crimes. Eichmann himself was charged with facilitating the mass deportation and extermination of Jews during the Holocaust. Only through his efforts were the Nazis capable of committing genocide with such brutal efficiency and on so broad a scale. The evidence against his case, in the forms of physical documentation and witness testimony, was immense. Over the next fifty-six days, hundreds of documents and 112 witnesses, many of whom were Holocaust survivors, testified to the horrible consequences of his actions. The trial went on to assume an even greater historical significance, in no small part due to the issues raised by Hannah Arendt in her final trial report, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Within it, Arendt concludes, "It was as though in those last minutes [Eichmann] was summing up the lesson [of] this long course in human wickedness—the lesson of the fearsome, word-and-thought-defying *banality of evil*" (252). What is the lesson of the "banality of evil," and what does it say about our own natures? In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt would come to challenge customary moral assumptions and redefine established notions concerning evil.

Arendt's choice of the word banality, meaning that which is common to all people, raises complex issues beyond the scope of the Eichmann trial. What does Arendt see in Eichmann that warrants such a claim? If evil is so common, how could Eichmann's actions be uniquely horrible? For many of her critics, Arendt's use of banality comes across as a perverse accusation: before your eyes, on trial, stands a murderer paralleled by few, if anyone, yet your verdict is not *guilty* but *banal*? Shortly after the release of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, her colleague, Gershom Scholem, wrote to her, "Your argument would apply equally to those hundreds of thousands, perhaps, millions of human beings, to whom your final sentence is relevant" (qtd. in Arendt, *The Jew as Pariah* 244). While I can sympathize with his sentiment, Scholem misses the essence of Arendt's insight. Eichmann was not a psychopath, nor a bloodthirsty warlord, nor a supernatural demon. In the context of Nazi Germany, amid like-minded individuals under a popular, totalitarian government, Eichmann was the equivalent of a

senior accountant—far from the corrupted ideologue one would assume, given the consequences of his actions. Moreso, questions of conscience were not his responsibility to answer inasmuch as they were not, evidently, the responsibility of other Germans. In his eyes, he merely sought to do his job as best he could.

In this grossly oversimplified view, Eichmann's actions could even be seen as understandable. Only now can we begin to see the crux of the issue. Evil is banal in that, when simplified, when not fully explored via individual thought, it can spread across people like wild-fire. This banality is perhaps best illustrated by Arendt herself: "[Evil] is 'thought-defying' as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing" (251). However, in order for evil to "spread across peoples," it requires more than the lack of thought of any individual. It requires a collective failure to think, a fault of which Nazi society was guilty. Throughout *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt notes Eichmann's lack of radical features. She writes, "Half a dozen psychiatrists had certified him as 'normal' . . . behind the comedy of the soul lay the hard fact that [Eichmann's] was no case of moral let alone legal insanity" (26). To say that Eichmann the individual was fully responsible is wholly unsatisfying. This man was motivated to adhere to a political system that requested he perform such actions. So while he was fully responsible for his actions, his thoughts regarding them were delegated to those politically above him. As such, his crimes were not only reflective of his individual criminality but also of the thoughtless, and subsequently corrupted, Nazi society that he was a part of. How could a society of millions of individuals collectively allow actions so heinous? Where was the thought behind these actions?

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

—Edmund Burke (in a letter addressed to Thomas Mercer)

In the television interview series *Zur Person*, Arendt describes a tension between man as a “thinking being” and man as an “acting being” (Gaus). Eichmann himself represents an extreme point along this spectrum, for his case features a total disconnect of action from thoughtful justification. Still, the challenge of merging thought with action confronts us all. If an entire modern society can fail to function simultaneously as both acting beings and thinking beings, there is a risk of failure again. What then, if anything, is the optimal balance of these two aspects of humanity—one that satisfies our moral standards with political reality?

In “Moral Idealism and Political Realism,” Simone de Beauvoir further outlines the issue at stake here. Writing among the rubble of post-World War II Paris, Beauvoir is all too aware of the consequences of weak political systems and thoughtless societies. Her home country of France not only surrendered to the Nazis, but even assisted Nazi forces in the deportation of French Jews to concentration camps.

My great-grandfather, Bruno Schanzer, was one of those Jews. Many times, my grandfather has retold the story of the last time he saw his father before he was deported. Only eight at the time, he did not understand why or where his father was going. What he does remember is that before being rounded up by the police, his father held him and his brother, and while in tears managed to whisper, “Be good boys . . . take care of your mother for me.” Soon after, he boarded a train, and my grandfather never saw his father again. This took place in St. Étienne, France, and those directly responsible for Bruno’s murder were French.

In the wake of the war, Beauvoir sought to answer the question: Where do we go from here? How do we determine the nature of our future political world? She recognized how, in the present world of liberal democracies, everyone is a political actor, and everyone is confronted with questions of deep moral complexity. Therefore, it is increasingly crucial that one thinks deeply and critically about their values and the larger aims for society. Yet, she notes, many instead take comfort in extreme and evidently dangerous political approaches.

To some, she goes on, moral idealism offers the justifiable escape. Of them, Beauvoir claims, “If they decide on moralism, they choose to obey an interior necessity, and enclose themselves in pure subjec-

tivity" (177). However, this version of moralism is deeply flawed. Mere adherence to general laws of justice and truth offers little in the way of a solution to specific political issues. While moralists would object to the notion that "the end justifies the means," such an approach nonetheless may allow, at least occasionally, for the best course of political action (178). What moralists fail to appreciate is their role as acting beings. Rather than apply their ideals to the real world, they abstain from participating in it.

On the other end of the spectrum exists what Beauvoir calls the "political realist," one who, having resolved that the end goal is justified, will take any step towards achieving that goal. The realist model necessarily assumes an objective understanding of reality, one that entails a relentless pursuit towards idealized futures and end goals. So, Beauvoir argues, "The end being posited as an absolute, and the means as relative to the end, the realist evades any moral indecision . . . the only problems posed to him are of a tactical nature" (181-82). The realist simplifies the situation by disregarding its moral implications, assuming that such factors are only a distraction from achieving the desirable outcome. The leaders of Vichy France, faced with the oncoming Nazi invasion, resolved that in order to save France, surrender was the only option. What these leaders failed to realize was that, by choosing to concede to Hitler, they destroyed the ideological foundation upon which France was built. They thought they were saving France but instead gave it up without resistance. They deported 77,000 of their own citizens, sentencing them to their deaths. A country that would act this way is not a country worth saving. As Beauvoir writes, "The first mistake of the political realist is to underestimate the existence and weight of his own reality" (181). By simplifying choice and its consequences, the realist fails to factor in the freedom and values they ought to protect.

In a sense, Beauvoir's comparison of the "moral idealist" to the "political realist" parallels Arendt's division between man as a "thinking being" and as an "acting being." Eichmann can be seen in both extremes. Eichmann acted as a realist by rigidly acting according to orders from Nazi command. He simplified his choice throughout, believing that he was but a cog in the machine rather than an independent, thinking person. Equally so, Eichmann considered his duty

paramount in much the same way a moral idealist would think of justice and law. While duty did not guide his decision-making, it provided a corrupted framework through which he was capable of justifying his actions.

Beauvoir concludes, “Reconciling ethics and politics is thus reconciling man with himself; it means affirming that at every instant he can assume himself totally” (189). This may appear to be the proper balance Arendt searches for in pitting thought against action. Yet in Arendt’s report of Eichmann, he, too, seems to make a reconciliation between idealism and realism. Where does his failure stem from, and what does it imply about Beauvoir’s conclusion? Perhaps it was that Eichmann lacked an individual sense of responsibility. Therefore, he could not reconcile these philosophies within himself, so he reconciled them outside himself. On the surface, such irresponsibility allowed Eichmann to project an air of normalcy. Still, true reconciliation requires a sense of oneself as an individual in the world, and thus it was Eichmann’s lack of the sense of self that ultimately led him astray.

Isn’t it so that if you do good, you shall be forgiven? However, if you will not do good it is because sin crouches at the entrance [of your heart], and to you shall be its longing, although you have the ability to subdue it.

—Genesis 4:7

Arendt’s idea of the “thought-defying banality of evil” contrasts earlier definitions of the term, particularly one from a Jewish perspective. From a general standpoint, the *Oxford English Dictionary* primarily describes evil as “the antithesis of [good] in all its principal senses” (“evil, *n.1.*”). Traditionally, Jewish philosophy sees this “antithesis of good” in connection with sinning against or transgressing the word of God. There is a concept within Jewish liturgy that every one of us has a *yetzer hara*, or evil inclination. Though it is always present, it does not necessarily make one evil. Rather, as beings with the ability to choose—as acting beings—we can overcome the evil within us. While Judaism similarly touches on the banality Arendt stresses, in that evil inclination is a common force, the source

of Jewish evil is instead derived from a failure to operate as an *acting being*, rather than as a *thinking being*.

Judaism's perspective on evil further speaks to Eichmann's failure as an acting being. While Eichmann's evil actions were exceptional, they stem from a common misconception: that the consequences of our actions are beyond our individual responsibility. Eichmann himself is quoted as saying, "I was one of the many horses pulling the wagon and couldn't escape left or right because of the will of the driver" (qtd. in Edidin). His perspective is one that does not appreciate the individual's ability to choose, or to frame it in Jewish terms, to overcome the *yetzer hara*. In much the same way that a realist concedes to existing political circumstances, Eichmann conceded his ability for action independent of his Nazi superiors. His argument does not diminish his guilt, but it does illustrate how his denial of choice enabled him to perform evil action.

On the other hand, Arendt's evaluation of Eichmann highlights the importance of fulfilling our collective role as thinking beings. Eichmann affirmed, "Now that I look back, I realize that a life predicated on being obedient and taking orders is a very comfortable life indeed. Living in such a way reduces to a minimum one's own need to think" (qtd. in Cohen). Only by dismissing the need for thought was he capable of executing his duties with a clear conscience, or at least with one that struggled to maintain supposed clarity. With critical thought comes nuance and perspective, which, given the thought-defying nature of evil, was incompatible with Eichmann's reasoning.

As an individual myself, I find the duality of human beings as both thinking beings and acting beings to be at once informative yet challenging. Arendt's banality is a concept difficult to accept, as it by definition reflects an element of the Eichmann in me, in all of us. Still, I know the existence of Arendt's ideas in the actual world to be true, for I see them in my own life. I was raised as an Orthodox Jew. In my pursuit of a good life, and as a student of Jewish philosophy, I have always lent particular attention to my role as an acting being. For me, evil was framed as a submission to the *yetzer hara*. Therefore, in a way, my active observance of Jewish law functioned as both a rejection of this evil and as a salient representation of my values. But I have always had questions and qualms about my faith. Over time, I have

come to doubt foundational assumptions within Jewish thought: the existence of a God, the creation myth, the sanctity of the Torah. Despite these doubts, for years I maintained a contradictory set of beliefs and actions. While religious observance fulfilled my acting being, it could not satisfy my thinking being.

Separately, Arendt showed through Eichmann that evil comes from a two-part failure: a failure of the thinking being, and a simultaneous failure of the acting being. In internalizing this idea, I no longer see a conscious suspension of my religious observance as an inherent submission to evil. On the contrary, it is a product of my employment of the acting being. At the same time, I realize that the process by which I define my being, both in thought and in action, is a continuous one. For in every person, the acting and thinking beings require constant attention, a scrupulous consideration of one's environment, and, most of all, an awareness of the self, of the ability to think and to choose, to feel the responsibility that comes with being human. Beauvoir similarly balances ethics with reality: "at every instant [man] can [and must] assume himself totally" (189). This balance is by definition complex work, as it requires a radical confrontation with banality, simplifications, and the forces of thoughtlessness and passivity that allowed for an Eichmann to exist in the world at all.

In opposition to the banality of evil is the good, for, as Arendt writes, "only the good has depth and can be radical" (251). In thinking of the radical good, I am reminded of my grandfather's story. In 1943, when my grandfather was eight, the Bonhommes, a French family, hid him and his brother. While hiding young Jewish boys on their farm, the family easily could have been condemned and put to death by Nazi authorities; they put their lives in great danger to save my grandfather. In their deep empathy for my family's condition, the French family embodied the thinking being. In the extreme measures they took to protect my grandfather and his brother, they assumed the role of acting beings in the highest form. Only through the fulfillment of both beings did they achieve the radical good. They assumed their responsibility not as friends or countrymen, but as human beings. It is because of their efforts that I am alive today. It is because of them that I am able to struggle against the banality of evil, to strive for this radical good.

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